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Ghana's extravagant funerals drive families into debt

By Lily Mensah | June 12, 2013 at 6:16 PM

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(GPI/Joseph Quaye Amoo)

ACCRA, Ghana (GPI)-- On a recent Sunday in a suburb of Accra, Ghana's capital, family and friends gathered happily for a celebration beneath the purple-and-white decorations of an outdoor venue, attendee Diana Kale says.

Although the scene resembled a birthday party or wedding, Kale was a guest at the funeral of a friend's 101-year-old family patriarch in Jamestown.



Funerals in Ghana often take the form of raucous parties rather than somber occasions. It is not uncommon for the festivities to last an entire weekend, beginning Friday and ending on Sunday evening.

At the recent funeral Kale attended, she says the guests reflected the joyous mood in their dress. They wore clothes that matched the décor and admired each other's outfits. Funerals here can be like fashion shows.

"For the fashion, most of the women were in new clothes with the latest styles," Kale says. "You know that these are some of the occasions where you get to see new styles of clothes sewn. Sometimes you even want to know the seamstress or the tailor who designed the dress for them so that you can seek their services."

As the party continued, scores of people danced their hearts out to the latest music, she says. Jubilant guests performed the acrobatic moves of the "azonto," a popular dance craze in Ghana.

Some guests had even traveled from abroad to attend the funeral, Kale says. The family went to great lengths to host their guests.

"There were varieties of food to choose from, which included local and continental dishes," she says. "The drinks also included spirited hard drinks and soft drinks, which one could choose from."

The advanced age of her friend's late grandfather merited a large party, she says, so his

family spared no expense to honor him.

"Getting to that age is not very easy," Kale says. "Therefore, it is a celebration of life."

It was also an occasion for the family to prove to their neighbors that they had prospered, she says. Family members from around the world contributed resources, proving to their neighbors that they were able to provide their deceased with a fitting memorial.

But this funeral was not unique. Funerals have become extravagant affairs in Ghana that attract crashers and professional criers.

Kale says that at the funeral of her father in 2007, three professional mourners arrived uninvited to cry at the burial. They claimed that the event was boring and people were not crying enough. Her mother paid each mourner 20 Ghanaian cedis (\$10) for their impromptu services.

Every weekend, the streets of Accra come alive with extravagant parties honoring the dead. Hosts go into debt to throw funerals more lavish than their neighbors' celebrations. Some locals complain that these funerals encourage immoral behavior. Other members of the community say that these events disturb the peace. But the police say they are doing all they can to regulate these events.

A Ghanaian funeral typically lasts three days, and between 300 and 400 people may attend, says Nii Kwatei Olemla I, a traditional ruler of the Ga community in La, a suburb of Accra.

The majority of these are Christian funerals. More than 70 percent of Ghana's population is Christian, according to the 2010 Population and Housing Census published by the Ghana Statistical Service.



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To prepare for the funeral of her grandmother, she says her family first improved their home for guests, which required substantial amounts of time and money.

Once the home was ready, they had to pay for guests' transportation, the venue, decorations and food, among other costs.

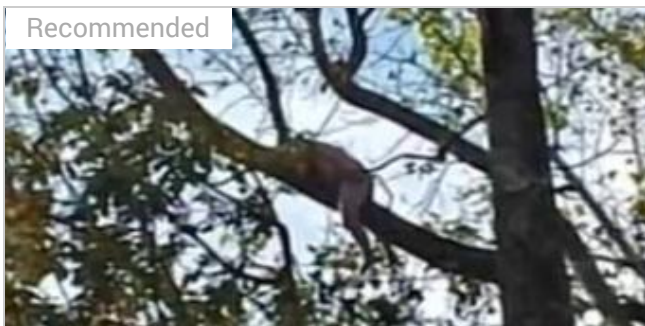
"Food, for instance, is a must," Dahoui says. "You need to feed the mourners who will attend the funeral. If the person is going to be buried in his hometown, people who move from the city to his hometown will have to be fed breakfast, lunch and dinner. You sometimes have to hire mattresses for them to sleep throughout the three days." Feedback

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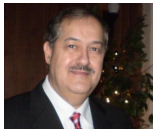
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